EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With the advent of Wildlife Conservation and Restoration Program and State Wildlife Grant legislation, the North Dakota Game and Fish Department can expand its fish and wildlife management programs. SWG resources allow the NDGFD to develop a more robust nongame fish and wildlife program for species that typically receive little or no attention. During the first few years of this program the NDGFD made considerable strides in adding staff to work on nongame and SWG issues. Much of their time the past three years has involved compiling scientific information on an array of fish and wildlife. The NDGFD staff have also worked to develop the state's first species of conservation priority list, networked and built a rapport with many future partners including but not limited to federal, state, and local agencies, nongovernmental organizations, universities, and private citizens; and finally, writing this document.

This document represents a strategy rather than a detailed plan to guide the process of preserving the state's fish and wildlife resources for the foreseeable future. This document is not a compilation of specific management plans for all the species of fish and wildlife at risk in North Dakota. There is simply not the knowledge at this point or the time to compile such a document. This document is also not an implementation plan but rather a strategic vision with the goal of preserving the state's wildlife diversity. North Dakota's CWCS is intended to identify species of greatest conservation need, provide fundamental background information, strategic guidance, and most importantly, a framework for developing and coordinated conservation actions involving partners to safeguard all fish and wildlife resources.

The CWCS is built upon eight essential elements, identified by Congress, with an overall focus on the "species of greatest conservation need." The eight elements include: (1) information on the distribution and abundance of species of wildlife including low and declining populations; (2) descriptions of locations and relative condition of key habitats and community types; (3) problems affecting species and priority research or survey efforts needed; (4) conservation actions needed to conserve the identified species; (5) plans for monitoring species and the effectiveness of conservation actions; (6) plans for reviewing the strategy; (7) coordinating with federal, state, and local agencies and Tribal government on the development and implementation of the strategy; and (8) involve broad public participation. These elements have been open to interpretation by the states. In addressing each of the eight elements, we used the best available information to the best of our ability.

For North Dakota, 100 species of conservation priority were identified under Element 1. This list includes 45 birds, 2 amphibians, 9 reptiles, 15 mammals, 22 fish, and 7 freshwater mussels. Each species was also given a priority designation based on conservation need. Level I species are those having a high level of conservation priority because of declining status in North Dakota or across their range; or have a high rate of occurrence in North Dakota, constituting the core of the species breeding range, but may be at-risk range-wide. Level II species are those having a moderate level of conservation priority; or a high level of conservation priority but a substantial level of non-SWG funding is available to them. Level III species are those having a moderate level of conservation priority but are believed to be peripheral or non-breeding in North Dakota. There are 29 Level I species, 41 Level II species, and 30 Level III species. A sizeable portion of the CWCS provides pertinent biological and habitat information and addresses elements 1-5 for each individual species. Many species do not have existing data relating to population status/dynamics, preferred habitat, threats and conservation actions. In other instances there is a better understanding of the status of a species, the threats affecting them, and the conservation actions needed. Such disparity in information will require additional research and surveys conducted for some species at the same time we are implementing conservation measures for others.

This CWCS is a habitat based, rather than species based. We divided North Dakota into nine primary landscape components, which are essentially the state's major habitat types. They include tallgrass prairie (Red River Valley); Eastern mixed-grass prairie (Drift Prairie); mixed-grass prairie (Missouri Coteau); Western mixed-grass/short-grass prairie (Missouri Slope); planted or tame grassland; wetlands and lakes; rivers, streams, and riparian; badlands; and upland deciduous forest. Details for Elements 2-4 are provided on each of these landscape components (i.e. condition of the habitat, the major problems affecting quality or quantity of it, and the conservation tools available). It is important to recognize that

species of conservation priority often depend on several habitat types or landscape components for survival. The key to ensuring their long term survival is to maintain diverse grasslands, wetlands, woodlands, rivers and streams. This cannot be reduced to certain isolated areas, but must occur over a broad landscape.

Current and desired monitoring efforts for species and habitats are addressed through Element 5. A flexible approach to monitoring yet conduct monitoring with performance measures in mind is needed. The NDGFD and its partners will attempt to continually evaluate conservation actions and treatments through various monitoring designs. New information will help guide and refine the process to allow for best management practices for species and habitat. If conservation actions are found to be ineffective in the management of the target species or habitat, steps will be taken to change the process.

The NDGFD visualizes the CWCS as a dynamic document that will be updated on a regular basis as new information becomes available. There is innovative research being conducted at local, regional and national levels. New incentive programs will likely be developed and staying informed of these to avoid duplication and maximize opportunities to partner is critical. The intent is to update the strategy annually and conduct a formal review every ten years, as element 6 requires continued examination of the CWCS. In addition, species of conservation priority needs may change, adding species to or subtracting from the list. The first official review of the 100 species of conservation priority will occur in five years.

Early on in developing the CWCS, the NDGFD recognized the scope and magnitude of this endeavor and embraced the need to coordinate efforts with partners and solicit their input. We met individually with staff from all principle land management agencies in the state, universities, nongovernmental organizations, and the general public. The feedback we received from these groups and their willingness to participate in focus groups, provide comments on drafts of the CWCS, and their overall support was outstanding. Since these initial meetings we have continued coordinating aspects of the strategy with many of these partners to the point where we view them as integral to the implementation of the strategy. Element 7 contains the underlying strength of North Dakota's CWCS.

The NDGFD is fortunate to have superb communication tools. From early on in the process, the public was informed of CARA, WCRP, SWG, and the CWCS via the NDGFD's monthly magazine, news releases, radio and television programs, website, and other media outlets throughout the state. A request for comments was sought after and welcomed if any was provided. The requirements of element 8 will be sustained throughout the future.

While the completion of the CWCS represents a major achievement and progress towards the goal of preserving North Dakota's fish and wildlife diversity, there is still a long way to go. This CWCS is just the first chapter in long-term multifaceted effort to implement management actions and conservation efforts. The next phase will involve refining goals to put the best available conservation tools into action.

"Without habitat, there is no wildlife. It's that simple."
- Wildlife Habitat Canada